

Chapter One

The History of Baptism

Before our Lord Jesus Christ instituted Christian baptism in the great commission he gave to the Church in Matthew 28:18-20, it was already being practised by others, as the Gospels clearly indicate. It was not a totally new religious ceremony which he brought into being. He therefore did not have to explain what he was requiring from his disciples by ordaining this religious rite and why. Though he had explained to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion the requirements and meaning of the ordinance of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:14-22), he did not do so in the case of baptism a few weeks later at his ascension. He simply made permanent and obligatory a ceremony which was already in existence and being practised by his disciples on a limited basis (John 4:1-2).

So to understand Christian baptism we must begin by looking at the way baptism was practised and taught prior to the Christian era. As we do so, we shall see that as it developed in its meaning and significance, the actual way it was carried out always remained the same (with one exception: baptism was now to be 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'). To begin with, we shall need to examine —

The baptism of proselytes to Judaism

Proselyte baptism was probably pre-Christian, although the documentary evidence for it only dates from AD 70. The Pharisees, we are told, 'travel land and sea to win one proselyte' (Matt. 23:15). A proselyte was a Gentile converted from paganism to Judaism. But before a proselyte could be received into the membership of God's people, three things took place. First, a sacrifice had to be offered. Second, if the person was a male, he had to be circumcised. And third, the candidate was then baptized before three witnesses or sponsors, after confessing his sin and his new faith in the God of Israel. The baptism was by immersion and it was self-administered. The candidate sat in a bath and baptized himself, 'washing away Gentile impurities'.

The language the rabbis used of the newly baptized proselyte is most instructive. They said he is 'like a newborn child', 'a new creation', that he has been 'raised for the Lord'. Accordingly, Gentiles who became Israelites in this way were described as 'born of water' (John 3:5) and 'not of blood' (John 1:13). Since such Israelites were not born of blood (that is, they were not blood descendants of Abraham), their baptism signified only a change of status, and not a birth in the sense of a moral or spiritual regeneration. Its equivalent today would be the process by which a foreigner becomes a 'naturalized' citizen of their adopted country. It does not involve the actual acquisition of a new nature, but only of a new nationality.

Hence our Lord's use of the term in John 3:5, 'Unless one is born of water [be cleansed] and the Spirit [be regenerated], he cannot enter the kingdom of God.' According to Jesus, it is not enough to be baptized in water to enter the kingdom of God; one must also be baptized with the Spirit and be 'born again' (literally 'born from above', John 3:3, 7; see also Matt. 3:11).

There is, therefore, a close link between proselyte baptism and Christian baptism, not only in the language used but also in the actions enjoined by both. And this correspondence cannot

be by coincidence. ‘The only possible conclusion is that the rites are related as parent to child.’¹

Despite this, it is important, in view of the claim made by some that proselyte baptism provides an argument for baptizing infants, to notice an important difference. Whilst the children of proselytes were also immersed, children born subsequently were not, on the ground that they were in the father’s loins at the time of his baptism.

The baptism of John

John the Baptist had a unique commission to baptize. In John 1:33 he claims that God had sent him to ‘baptize with water’, and it is likely that he adapted proselyte baptism for the purpose of his peculiar mission. There was one big difference, however, and it was this: John commanded even those who were Jews by birth to submit to a rite which was devised exclusively for the benefit of Gentiles. In other words, John was treating his fellow Jews as sinners who needed to repent of their sins and be forgiven before they could enter the kingdom of God. Matthew 3:7-10 makes this very clear: ‘But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” As he saw it, what excluded people from the kingdom of God was not their physical descent (their Gentile birth), but their spiritual depravity (their inherent sinfulness).

John, therefore, preached the necessity of repentance for the remission of sins and offered baptism as a means by which people could publicly confess their sins and lay hold upon the hope of forgiveness from God through the coming Messiah. Actual participation in the act of baptism on the part of the candidate was itself an acted profession of repentance and John’s administration of it to the penitent sinner was a pledge of divine remission soon to be offered. Mark 1:4-5 records that ‘John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins’.

Here it is important to notice that John’s baptism was anticipatory in that it looked forward to the one who would make good these promises. He, in contrast to John’s ceremonial baptism with water, would baptize men with the Holy Spirit. Two passages make this clear. (1) Mark 1:7-8: ‘And he preached, saying, “There comes one after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit”’; (2) John 1:29-33: ‘The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who is preferred before me, for he was before me.’ I did not know him; but that he should be revealed to Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.” And John bore witness, saying, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and he remained upon him. I did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’”

John’s baptism was not only a symbol of promised cleansing, but also a symbol of anticipated spiritual quickening — of death to the old life of sin, and the beginning of a new life of holiness — a life characterised by the fruits of repentance (Luke 3:10-14).

¹ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, (Westminster, 1960), p. 36.

Our Lord's own baptism

The head of the church who commanded his followers to be baptized, submitted to the rite himself and permitted his disciples to baptize (see John 3:22; 4:1-2). He made a two-day journey to the river Jordan to be baptized by John, who was naturally reluctant at first to do so. For if John's baptism was for penitent sinners who were confessing their need of cleansing from God, why should the sinless Son of God desire to be baptized? John was therefore hesitant to baptize Jesus: 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. And John tried to prevent him, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and are you coming to me?"' (Matt. 3:13-14). But when Jesus assured him that it was necessary 'to fulfil all righteousness', he consented. 'But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he allowed him' (verse 15). What did our Lord mean by that phrase, 'to fulfil all righteousness'?

Well, to begin with, the word righteousness simply means doing what is right in the eyes of God. And since God required, through his prophet John, Jews to be baptized, the Son of God obediently fulfilled this divine requirement, even though in his sinless state it was not necessary for him to do so. He had no sins to confess and therefore nothing of which to repent. But he was baptized all the same because he came to be our representative, identifying himself with us sinners and taking our place. In other words, Jesus was baptized as an example of obedience for us. If this is what God requires of sinners, then as the representative of sinners he would fulfil the righteous requirements of God.

But there was something even more important about Christ's baptism. It was not only an example of obedience for us to follow, it was also an outward picture of what would be required to make us righteous before God. For his baptism (literally, immersion) in water was a symbol of that greater baptism of suffering and death that would engulf his soul upon the cross. Luke 12:50 records him as saying, 'I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!' Jesus was referring to his atoning death for sinners at Calvary. To Jesus Christ the waters of baptism were the waters of God's judgment upon the sin of all those he was going to save.

His coming up from the watery grave of baptism was also a picture of his resurrection and ascension by which the Father acknowledged and approved his work of redemption. That is what the voice from heaven was referring to when it said (Matt. 3:17), 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'

And again, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism in the form of a dove (Matt. 3:16), was not only God's promised anointing of power to fulfil his mission on earth (Luke 4:18-19 and Isa. 61:1-2), but also the witness and pledge that when his work was completed and he was glorified in heaven, the promised Spirit would be given to all for whom he died. Thus Jesus said to the crowds in John 7:37-38, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified' (cf. John 1:32-33).

Here, then, our Lord's baptism in water points unmistakably to his death and resurrection as the source of the twin blessings of salvation — the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). And in the teaching of Jesus and his apostles this became the main and deeper meaning of baptism, namely, that baptism by immersion in water is a divine picture and pledge of a believer's spiritual union with Christ in his death and resurrection, resulting in our co-crucifixion and co-resurrection with Jesus (Rom. 6:3-14).

Christian baptism

In the Old Testament circumcision was the ‘sign’ and ‘seal’ of the covenant which God made with the children of Israel through Abraham (Rom. 4:11). But hundreds of years later God’s prophets predicted that this covenant would be replaced by a new covenant which would offer to God’s people not only forgiveness for their sins, but also the power of the Holy Spirit to live a holy life. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 God gave his people this promise: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.’

In Ezekiel 36:24-27 God repeats this promise to his people who were then in exile. ‘I will ... gather you out of all countries, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them.’ Forgiveness of sins (or cleansing) and the power of the Holy Spirit to keep God’s commandments (or a new heart) are the twin blessings of salvation promised by God to his people under the new covenant.

It is therefore significant that on the eve of his crucifixion our Lord Jesus Christ inaugurated this new covenant at the Last Supper when he clearly and boldly took the cup of wine and said to his disciples, ‘This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins’ (Matt. 26:28). But it is not only the bread and the wine of the Lord’s Supper that is a sign and a seal of the new covenant. So, too, is baptism by immersion in water. Thus in Matthew 28:18-20, just before his ascension to the Father’s right hand, our Lord said to his disciples, ‘All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’

This was the moment when Christian baptism was officially instituted by our Lord and Saviour as the second ordinance or sacrament of the soon-to-be formed Christian church. First, like Jewish baptism and John’s baptism, it involved the immersion of the candidate in water as an act of initiation into the company of God’s people. It also demanded confession and repentance, as the following passages show. Acts 2:38: ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.’ But it did not stop there. It called for faith in Jesus as the Christ (or the Messiah), the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Acts 8:12: ‘But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized.’ (See also Acts 16:31-33.)

Second, it was to be administered in the name of the triune God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), something altogether new and foreign to Jewish thought. Thirdly, it was to be seen not as a pledge of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit as *future* blessings (as was the case with John’s baptism), but of blessings *presently* available. For the one who was to make good the promises of John’s baptism was Jesus Christ and he had come. By his death and

resurrection he has procured as a present possession for all believers these blessings of the new covenant. Thus on the day of Pentecost, Peter could say to the multitude who were cut to the heart by his sermon and wanted to know what they must do: ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2:38).

The emergence of infant baptism

The practice of believers’ baptism by immersion, as we have traced it, was perpetuated by the apostles and the early church. In the New Testament there is no express command to baptize infants and no account of any clear instance of infant baptism (although some people infer it from the baptism of ‘households’ recorded in Acts 16:15,33 and elsewhere). Post-apostolic writings also show that believers’ baptism was widely practised till the end of the fourth century, and the practice of infant baptism only arose in the third century, starting with emergency baptisms of mortally ill infants. This position was still held in the fourth century, where Gregory, Bishop of Nazianzus, allowed infant baptisms on emergency grounds only. Healthy infants, he believed, have no sins to confess and therefore no need to be baptized until they do. We shall give more attention to the views of the early church in chapter 5 when we consider the ‘subjects of baptism’.

So, according to early church writings, infant baptism only began to appear when the belief became widespread that baptism magically conveys salvation. Superstitiously, people began to believe that baptism by itself washed away a person’s sin. And the logical conclusion of this belief was that the sooner a person was baptized, the safer it was for them. Thus infants were baptized as soon as possible after birth to ensure the removal of original sin; and all babies who died without being thus baptized were regarded as lost forever. This view is still taught in many parts of Christendom, and is a factor behind the concern of many parents to have their babies christened.

Once the meaning of baptism was lost, the mode itself became unimportant and was gradually changed for the sake of convenience. It should be noted, however, that immersion (of infants) has been retained by the Orthodox churches of Greece and Russia to this day. The first recorded case of affusion (pouring) was that of a man called Novatian who lived about AD 250. Due to illness he could not leave his bed and so he was baptized by the pouring of water over his head. By about the fourth century affusion became the accepted method, but was gradually replaced by sprinkling, which was less inconvenient and easier to administer to infants and the dying who, it was felt, had to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

The recovery of believers’ baptism by immersion

With the Reformation and the rediscovery of the biblical principle of salvation by faith in Christ alone, many who joined Luther and Zwingli in their revolt against the church of Rome were led by their studies to reconsider the question of baptism. They discovered that the New Testament says nothing about infant baptism and that baptism was administered only to believers on profession of their faith in Christ. These people were dubbed Anabaptists (re-baptizers) because they baptized those who had already been baptized as infants. But the Anabaptists did not see their new baptism as a re-baptism, for they did not accept that infants were validly baptized. The first baptismal service of believers in the Reformation era was held in Zurich on 25 January, 1525, when Konrad Grebel baptized a former monk by the name of George Blaurock, who followed by baptizing fifteen others.

Here was a parting of the ways. From this time on until the present day the question of believers' baptism in place of infant baptism has not ceased to be a matter of serious controversy in the Christian church. At the beginning many Anabaptists were either imprisoned, banished or martyred for their obedience to the Word of God. On 5 January 1527, Felix Manz was drowned in the River Limmat for practising believers' baptism. To the authorities it seemed poetic justice. Zwingli's comment was, 'Let him who talks about going under [the water] go under!' Ulrich Zwingli, the leader of the Reformation movement in Zurich, became a stormy upholder of infant baptism.

It was a sad day! Protestant had killed Protestant for the crime of obeying God's Word as he understood it. And to make matters worse, the Reformers knew that baptism for believers only by immersion was what the Bible taught. Zwingli, for example, had given baptism much thought previously. 'Nothing grieves me more than at present I must baptize children, for I know it ought not to be done ... but if I were to stop the practice of Infant Baptism, I would lose my office.' And again, 'I leave baptism untouched. I call it neither right nor wrong. If we were to baptize as Christ instituted it, then we would not baptize any person until he reached the years of discretion, for I find Infant Baptism nowhere written or practised. But we must practise it now so as not to offend our fellow men ... It is better not to preach [believers' baptism] until the world is ready to receive it.'

Fortunately, there were men in the church ready to practise it. And the Anabaptist movement spread rapidly throughout Switzerland and into Europe. Robbed by death of their best leaders, some Anabaptists followed fanatics. But under the providence of God there emerged from the movement the various free churches which still practise the New Testament doctrine of believers' baptism by immersion — the Mennonites, the Baptists, the Christian Brethren, some Independents and the Pentecostals, together amounting to many millions.